



Out There
ANTHONY HOY

PINE CLONES

The Wollemi pine, growing when dinosaurs walked the Earth, was thought to be extinct, now it's set to be planted all over the world.

AUSTRALIA'S WOLLEMI PINE is the supermodel of trees, surrounded by bodyguards, fans, stalkers, and its own entourage. Like a supermodel, the wollemi pine doesn't exactly do much; it simply is. Yet people crave a glimpse of this tall, slender wonder. Up to 20 million will view an example before the World Exposition 2005, in Aichi, Japan, closes this September; a wollemi is the feature exhibit at the Australian Pavilion.

Later in 2005, wollemi will be shown at the Taiwan National Museum and Disney Hong Kong. All this attention might be expected to go to the wollemi's head, if it had one; but the wollemi is probably grateful merely to exist. Prior to 1994, this relic of the Jurassic period was presumed extinct. Its accidental discovery - by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Officer and bushwalker David Noble - was likened to finding a bunch of dinosaurs wandering around in the forests north of Sydney. Interest in the wollemi has built ever since.

In fact, interest in ancient Australian natural artefacts is sometimes too great.



PINOSAUR JUNIOR 500 plants propagated from wild cuttings will be sold in October

Relic hunters have stolen dinosaur footprints from outback sites and used cranes to remove fossil-laden boulders from Riversleigh Station in far north Queensland. To protect the wollemi, its Queensland growing facility – exact location unknown to any but the wollemi's closest friends – is surrounded by an 800-volt electric fence and protected by armed security and guard dogs. Heidi Klum herself is more vulnerable.

Brisbane nursery operator Barbara McGeoch runs the wollemi commercial breeding program in conjunction with Queensland DPI Forestry. On winning the commercialisation tender in 1998, McGeoch and Qld Forestry were handed 500 wollemi pines that the NSW Botanic Gardens had propagated from cuttings. From that initial batch, the joint venturers have bred what is known as the "Conservation Collection" of almost half a million wollemi pines, for global release next year to selected gardens and nurseries.

In October there will be a limited release "Collectors Edition" of 500 wollemi pines – the first generation to be propagated from wild cuttings – at an auction in Sydney's Botanic Gardens. Each plant will be certified as traceable back to the 40m "King Billy" – the tallest of the wild stock, estimated to be more than 1000 years old.

Says McGeoch: "In commercialising the wollemi we are not only bringing a tree back from the verge of extinction, but it also acts as a flagship species to raise awareness of conservation worldwide."

McGeoch's website www.wollemipine.com is drawing enormous global traffic, with potential buyers – a significant number of them schools in North America and elsewhere interested in featuring the wollemi in science and education curricula – rushing to join her Wollemi Pine Conservation Club to purchase their own wollemi specimens and a connection to the past.

"The wollemi covered most of the super continent of Gondwana," McGeoch says. "It started to disappear with the dinosaur.

"Quite apart from anything else, it is a very attractive plant, a conifer with attractive, unusual dark green foliage and bubbly bark,"

NO OTHER PLANT IN THE WORLD HAS CREATED AS MUCH ATTENTION AS THE WOLLEMI PINE

BARBARA McGEOCH WHO RUNS A COMMERCIAL WOLLEMI BREEDING PROGRAM

she says. "It is highly adaptable as either an indoor or outdoor plant, for bonsai, and its lateral branches can be trained as ground covers in rockeries and for landscaping."

And it's tough, as might be expected of a plant that has survived 17 ice ages. The US National Arboretum in Washington displayed a wollemi for six weeks, proving it could withstand temperatures as low as minus 12.6°C. With a view to mounting its own display, the Smithsonian Institute – the world's largest museum complex, drawing 30 million visitors each year – began coordinating trials for botanic gardens throughout North America. These include San Francisco's Strybing Gardens; gardens in Missouri, Atlanta, Huntington and Chicago; and Canada's Butchart gardens. And Disneyworld Florida, with 18,000 visitors per day, will also present a Wollemi display.

But that is an unusually common site for the supermodel wollemi, which is more accustomed to royalty and the European capitals. His Imperial Highness Prince Akishino – patron of Japan's International Garden and Horticulture Exhibition – planted one of the exhibition specimens in the private gardens of

his home, the Akasaka Imperial Palace Estate. Australian Ambassador Deborah Stokes last year presented a wollemi to Austria, to mark the Vienna Botanic Garden's 250th anniversary. Other botanic gardens across Europe – Paris, Amsterdam, Belgium, Geneva and Edinburgh among them – also sought wollemis.

"No other plant in the world," says McGeoch, "has created as much attention as the wollemi pine." Wollemania continues; BBC *Life on Earth* broadcaster Sir David Attenborough will unveil the tree for the first time in the UK at the Chelsea Flower Show in May. Anticipating massive public interest in the wollemi display, a BBC team is in Australia developing background coverage to air at the time of the Chelsea unveiling.

The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew – home to the world's largest and most diverse collection of living plants (including the collection from botanist Sir Joseph Banks' 1770 cruise with Captain James Cook up Australia's east coast) – will also trial the tree in secret locations in southern England.

From humble rural Australia to fashionable Chelsea; let's hope this celebrity export never forgets its roots. ●



WOLLEMI PINES

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Wollemia nobilis

DISCOVERED

In 1994, in a rainforest gorge in the 500,000 hectare Wollemi National Park in the Blue Mountains by David Noble, a National Parks and Wildlife Officer.

AGE

It belongs to the 200 million year-old Araucariaceae family and its oldest known fossil dates back 90 million years.

WILD POPULATION

Less than 100 mature trees.

CHARACTERISTICS

Conifer with attractive, unusual dark green foliage, bubbly bark and sprouts multiple trunks.

SIZE

The largest in the gorge is 40m tall.

SOURCE

www.wollemipine.com